

May 15, 1994

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Steven J. Schwartz  
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Dear Steve,

Regarding your letter of May 5, 1994 mentioning interest in information about San Nicolas Island during the war, circa 1943-44. Unfortunately, I have no journal, so specific dates are difficult to recall with accuracy. I will do my best.

I was attached to a Carrier Aircraft Service Unit under the leadership of Commander Bundy U.S.N. The unit designation was C.A.S.U. (F) 8. The time was 1943-44

Navy personnel manned a waffle plate temporary emergency landing field. Our unit was composed of approximately 500 men. The mess hall was a wooden structure on concrete foundation. The island crew were rotated for short leave or liberty by means of a L.C.I. (Landing Craft Infantry) which we boarded from a motor launch moored to a small quay on the eastside beach area of the island. The L.C.I. then transported us to Port Hueneme for our three day leave.

Side-light: At the bottom of the mess kitchen grease trap there should be a large stainless steel ladle dropped accidentally by Seaman 1st Class Edward T. Wilson.

I am not sure what exactly what would be of interest or importance. I have enclosed the following story, just in case.

Sincerely,

*Verne*

Verne D. Wilt

There should be wreckage remains of a Grumman TBM and a Dauntless dive bomber located about a mile from where the 45 foot high wooden airfield control tower was located. The story behind those wrecks may be important to you:

One early evening, about 6:30 P.M., all hell broke loose! A weather front moved in over the island and fog enveloped the airfield. A light rain began falling. Visibility dropped to ground zero in less than six minutes time. Carrier aircraft that had been practicing from the decks of carriers Wasp and Hornet were routed to airfields not closed in by fog. The seven planes aloft, lucky enough to have fuel reserves, were dispatched to Mira Loma and Point Mugu landing fields.

The San Nicholas field was "socked in". All the island's motor vehicles were lined up along the perimeter of the airfield with their headlights turned on. We were landing aircraft in both directions on the small field. One aircraft, the last plane able to land, missed the control tower by less than ten feet. The pilot zoomed up at the last second, engine revving to the maximum. The pilot, probably feeling he knew where the tower was located, made one last attempt to land. Miraculously touching down at the extreme end our runway, his over-used brakes resulted in a ground loop. It was truly a blind landing.

The tower commander radioed the aircraft still aloft hunting for the field, recommending that the pilots gain altitude to 3,000 feet before their fuel reserves were exhausted, then bail out. He assured them that LCI's patrolling San Nicholas would rescue them from the water quickly. After this message was transmitted we noted an eerie glow emanating from several spots around the airfield. There was not an engine sound to be heard.

The duty officer assembled a group of men in order to form a search party. He stated his belief that several planes had flown into the ground trying to land on our strip. The glowing areas began flickering out. The fog started slowly drifting away. By this time our search group had reached the area where the last little glowing light had been seen. It was a very small plateau area. A Grumman TBM had crashed at about a 25 degree angle. Any fire that may have begun had extinguished by the time we arrived on the scene. I peered into the turret gunners turret, the only intact portion of the aircraft. There was no body. The 50 caliber gun butts were covered in blood. The plexiglass turret shell was caked with clotting blood, more than I believed possible. I was sure the turret gunner had not survived his crash injury.



There was live ammunition and rocket rounds scattered around the wreckage. While searching the area we heard yells from the other team about 100 yards distant. We ran in that direction to a small ravine about ten feet in height. There we found a totally destroyed Dauntless dive bomber. It's Pratt and Whitney radial engine base had buried in flush with the dirt bank. One searcher called out with a ghastly discovery. The pilot's spine was draped on a near by rock. We could determine no other occupant of the plane.

Our search officer assembled our group, ordering us to board a personnel truck, stating there were reports of a pilot landing by parachute at the northern end of the island and we were to head there for a search. The truck took about 15 minutes on the dark, narrow, dusty and rough road. We formed search parties of three with each group sharing the few flashlights taken along. We searched diligently along the shoreline, calling out every few minutes. There was no response.

The rain had stopped. A million stars were shining brightly. It was a perfectly clear night. One and one-half hours late for those pilots whose time was up.

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**Verne D. Wilt to Steven J. Schwartz, May 15, 1994.**

Verne Wilt served on San Nicolas Island during World War II. He was attached to Carrier Aircraft Service Unit (CASU (F) 8) under the leadership of Commander Bundy; 1943-44.

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